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Review of Victor Davis Hanson, *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization*

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Victor Davis Hanson, *The Other Greeks: The Family Farm and the Agrarian Roots of Western Civilization.* New York: The Free Press, 1995. Pp. xvi + 541. $28.00. ISBN 0-02-913751-9.

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The Other Greeks, is a challenge to the typical scholarly approach to the rise and fall of the Greek *polis*. Hanson's central thesis is that the agrarian culture of Greece from the seventh to the fourth century BC is completely responsible for the political, economic, and social systems of that era. In particular, economic development and social stability resulted from the Greek recognition of the importance of the private ownership of land, the need to address the inequalities that arose from agrarianism, and the need to construct rules limiting the cost and destruction of war (pp. 399-401). At first glance his topic seems simple and obvious: of course, successful agriculture and the advance beyond subsistence farming was a necessary factor in the development of the Greek city-state. But the extent of the relationship between agrarianism and the *polis* is usually greatly understated or passed over. Hanson sketches this affiliation in great detail, filling in the agricultural background that most scholars lack. The resulting portrait of Greek life is unquestionably provocative: agrarianism (as Hanson consistently calls it) must be seen as one of the important roots of the institutions of the Greek polis.

This work is aimed at both the scholarly and non-scholarly audience. Hanson deliberately chooses a midway tone -- neither scholarly nor colloquial -- because he has a secondary goal of using his own practical experience in the cultivation of trees and vines to convey some idea of contemporary American agricultural practices. As he states in the last chapter, he believes that this "vulgarization" of Classics is necessary in order to convey to the public the value of a Classical education if Classics is to be preserved as an academic discipline (pp. 415-19).

Hanson's two major flaws are already apparent. First, by offering an argument for the exclusivity of agrarian causation, he distorts the events of Greek history by omitting critical elements of the picture. *Pecca fortiter*: he does not hesitate to make bold claims. Second, by adopting a less scholarly tone he misses both of his potential audiences: the lay reader will be confused and distracted by the transliterated Greek terms and the

arguments that are made from primary evidence, while the scholar will object to the oversimplifications and general assertions made without support.

This investigation is divided into three main sections. Part One, "The Rise of the Small Farmers in Ancient Greece" (ch. 1-4, pp. 25-178), explores the emergence of small, diversified farms in the era after the Greek Dark Ages. Part Two, "The Preservation of Agrarianism" (ch. 5-7, 179-323), discusses the influence of this new agricultural reality on the political, military and economic systems of Greece. Finally, Part 3, "To Lose a Culture" (ch. 8-10, pp. 323-433), describes the decline of this agrarianism and the resulting decline of the Greek *polis.*

Chapter One, "The Liberation of Agriculture," argues that the palace bureaucracy of the Mycenaean governments gave way to a retribalization during the Dark Ages. Political and social authority in the resulting society lay among those who possessed large herds, landed estates, and the ability to organize successful raiding parties. The pressure of overpopulation brought an end to this interim social structure. It forced a quiet revolution in agriculture that, in turn, produced a new Greek society that was highly flexible, economically decentralized, socially egalitarian, and politically anti-aristocratic. Since the documentation of events in the eighth century is clearly impossible, Hanson is forced to rely here more on plausibility in describing these transformations. The scene he describes is intriguing and conceivable, and so the reader is willing to be indulgent.

Chapter Two, "Laertes' Farm," uses the evidence from bk. 24 of the *Odyssey*, supported whenever possible by archaeology, to distinguish the six defining characteristics of this new agrarianism. First, although it is often assumed that farmers commuted to their farms, there is abundant evidence of permanent homestead residence outside the city, whose very isolation, according to Hanson, gives each farmer his independent character. Second, private, rudimentary efforts toward irrigation made possible the widespread cultivation of fruit trees and vines, plants that require an external water supply for the first 2-3 years, until an extensive root system is established. Third, slave labor became available cheaply through raiding and conquest, allowing farmers to cultivate labor-intensive vines and trees. Fourth, the resulting diversification of crops spread the demand for labor evenly over the calendar year, while at the same time maximizing production and minimizing risk of a problem with the crop. Fifth, the cultivation of marginal land with new species of vines, olives, and fruit trees produced more food and thus more wealth. Finally, since the dominant products -- bread, wine, and oil -- all required processing, localized food processing and storage allowed the farmer to eliminate the middle man and increase profit. Although point six could use substantially more supporting evidence, on the whole, this is a strong, well-argued chapter, and it is not harmed in any way by the presumption that *Odyssey* 24, since it is a late addition, can be viewed as a representation of farming at the time of Homer.

Chapter Three, "Hesiod's *Works and Days*: The Privilege of the Struggle," describes the new ideology of the ennobling value of work that was derived from land ownership. Changes in agriculture led to social changes and demands for political ones when the intense dislike of the landed and wealthy elite felt by the agrarian class of small farmers caused those farmers to create the polis as we know it. Solon's legislation is interpreted as a populist check upon the aristocratic landowners and an encouragement to the yeomen, as Hanson calls them, who were investing in trees and vines. In the resulting political atmosphere, agricultural expertise, not mere birth, brought social prestige and political representation. Again, evidence is sparse, as it usually is during the Archaic period, and the indulgence of the reader is beginning to grow thin.

Chapter Four, "The Ways of Farmers," is one of the brightest points in this book. It offers an overview of the daily experiences and challenges facing the Greek agrarian, with an eye toward demonstrating that this lifestyle was inherently noble and worth preserving. The Greek farmer faced innumerable threats, from natural disasters (weather, insects and animals, plant pathogens, too small a crop, too large a crop), manmade difficulties (military service, army invasions, economic rivalry with neighbors), personal problems (poor health, an abundance or lack of offspring), and miscellaneous problems (equipment maintenance, water supply, sewage disposal). The resulting farmer was conservative, with a strong respect for repetition and tradition. Also, although he despised the aristocracy, he was also anti-democratic. He believed in restricting social privilege to those who helped themselves: the hard-working farmers. Thus agrarianism was the cause rather than the result of Greek attitudes of social and political discrimination against the landless poor, slaves, and women.

Chapter Five, "Before Democracy: Agricultural Egalitarianism and the Ideology Behind Greek Constitutional Government," is an attempt to explain the political construction of the polis as a product of the agrarian system and ideology. Hanson argues that small and equal farm size was a unifying community ideology that was entirely created by moral constraints, part of a Greek desire for equality of land-holding and the preservation of the small farmer class. The agrarian governments of the seventh and sixth centuries were broad-based timocracies of middling farmers, preserved by law and idealized in philosophical writings.

This chapter raises a number of small problems that nag the reader's mind because they involve aspects of the discussion that are stated rather than argued. For example, Hanson assumes as part of his reasoning that the grid system of land distribution of colonies was derived from the desire to reproduce or improve upon the equality of land holding in the mother city. "These landowning patterns are more than just the result of the neatness of planned surveying that facilitates real-estate transaction. Instead, they are an effort by the Greek *georgoi* to start afresh with one family per farm of about the same size. They wanted no repetition of the struggles at the end of the Dark Ages between the upstart *kakoi* and the privileged *agathoi*" (p. 195). No evidence is offered for this interpretation,

except that it fits nicely into his theory, and he neglects then to take into account the arrival of subsequent immigrants who are not included in the original grid and so do not share in either the land equality or the political privilege of the very few original colonists.

Chapter Six, "The Ways of Fighters," argues that the change in agricultural practice first challenged the aristocratic economic interests, and then demanded new methods of waging wars over entirely new objectives. Hanson believes that the new aim of fighting was simple defense of the land, especially the border land between two communities. Therefore, it was in the interests of the land-owners, and no one else, to do the fighting. This led to a new military formation, the phalanx, and only then to the adoption of new arms, the hoplite panoply. "If the countryside was to be a patchwork of roughly similar farms worked by leather-clad yeomen, the phalanx was an analogous grid of identically bronze-clothed fighters. Whether a farmer looked over at his neighbor's plot, or over at the man next to him in battle, or over at the agriculturalist seated next to him in the assembly, the unique egalitarianism of the agrarian *polis* was continually reemphasized and enhanced" (p. 249). Victory was not dependent upon strategy, tactics, or generalship, but rather was decided quickly and decisively by the brute strength, steadfastness, and, most of all, nerve of the combatants, traits that were intrinsic to the small farmer.

This otherwise excellent discussion suffers seriously from two major omissions. First, Hanson fails to offer proper weight to the phenomenon of tyranny in sixth-century Greek states. Overlooking the fact that the majority of Greek states did experience a period of tyranny that accomplished the widening of the oligarchic base, Hanson says, "Although at some city-states tyrants at the head of a phalanx could bring about a dramatic end to old aristocracies, as we have seen in Chapter 3, more often they simply were not needed" (p. 239). No discussion of tyranny occurred in ch. 3, and no further discussion of the political and military impact of tyranny is deemed necessary here. Second, when discussing the causes of victory for the hoplite line, Hanson concludes that the deciding feature is usually nerve, which he attributes to the farmer's life and moral ideology (p. 280). Yet, to fit this argument into his thesis he is forced to downplay the recognized military dominance of Sparta because it is not a society made up of small, independent farmer-citizens. A short discussion of Sparta late in the work (pp. 391-92) describes it -- along with Thessaly and Crete -- as an anomalous area of Greece in which the polis never really emerges, but the reader is left dissatisfied that the paradigm hoplite state is largely left out of the discussion of the development of hoplite warfare.

Chapter Seven, "The Economy of Agrarian Warfare," stresses the low cost of hoplite warfare, both economically and physically. The collective economic burden to the polis was small, as farmers provided their own arms and were not paid for their service. In addition, the hoplite faced only about a 10% chance of death in any given battle (compared to the 40% fatality rates in Hellenistic and Roman battles) and, in the seventh and sixth centuries, fought fairly infrequently anyway. All this changed in the fifth

century, particularly in the transformation of the craft of war during the Peloponnesian War. The hoplite panoply was reduced and modified. State pay and armament were introduced, as were cavalry skirmishes, missiles, artillery, and light-armed skirmishes. Sieges, raids, ambushes, and naval engagements replaced set, decisive battles. And the general was clearly distinguished from other soldiers and given extensive command. The results were extensive military and civilian deaths, neglected farms as wars were prolonged, steep taxes, empty treasuries, and a cycle of repeated conquest, enslavement, and revolt.

This is another strong chapter so far as it goes, but it is also one that suffers from large omissions. For example, his discussion of early trade is abridged and, I believe, grossly distorted: "Most early city-states of the Greek mainland possessed only a few military ships of any sort. Given the agrarian character of the polis, and the general distrust of farmers for the sea, the majority of Greek farming communities was suspicious of extensive organized navies in the seventh and sixth centuries. We can therefore dismiss the notion that extensive commerce and overseas involvement, not the agrarianism indigenous to Greece herself, sparked the so-called Hellenic renaissance of the eighth century" (p. 294). He seems to confuse military navies with commercial enterprises, and this confusion of military isolation with commercial and social isolation is continued throughout the work. Hanson describes the Greeks as being relatively isolated from the rest of the Mediterranean world from the eighth until the fifth century, when Athenian imperialism caused Greece to reenter the larger context of Mediterranean history (e.g., p. 408). He dismisses the importance of earlier commercial contacts, saying, for example, "Colonization of the eighth and seventh centuries did *not* alleviate the need for local agricultural change, but rather was a symptom that *such transformation was already occurring in Greece proper*" (p. 39). Thus begins -- and ends -- his discussion of the economic impact of early trade and colonization movements. He never discusses the market for agricultural produce outside of the *polis*, and so he leaves the distinct impression that all Greek goods were produced and consumed locally until the fifth century when suddenly, "... many in the Greek city-states first learned of a wealth *beyond* their borders, and of the opportunities for Greek economic and military practice *beyond* the egalitarian sanction of the *polis*" (p. 359).

On a related note, one of the underlying presumptions of this work, and one that I think must be argued for carefully and specifically, is that the hoplite class is equivalent to the landed farmers and does not include, for example, the wealthy merchants of the seventh and sixth centuries. At one point he asserts, "During the heyday of the phalanx (i.e., the first two centuries of the *polis* period), the *georgoi* wanted non-property owners to be excluded from infantry service, Greeks who might have otherwise been able to acquire the necessary accoutrements" (p. 296). No evidence is offered for this remarkable statement, but the basic idea resurfaces later, where he allows that, "... at least by the middle of the fourth century, a man's equipment and manner of fighting were no longer

always an accurate representation of his social status: many hoplites may not have been farmers and some may not even have owned their own arms" (p. 383).

Chapter Eight, "Hoplites as Dinosaurs," continues the description of the change in Greek warfare by stepping back, temporally, to the Persian invasions and arguing for their role in beginning the transformation. The invasions demonstrated the limitations of hoplite warfare in facing a threat larger than a border dispute between communities. The Greek military had to be set loose to devise new means to survive the threat. The resulting techniques, employing naval warfare, skilled generals, and large scale invasions, enabled the emergence of Sparta and Athens as hegemons in a polarized Greek world and spelled the beginning of the end for the city-state. This is a well-argued and documented section, and one of the most convincing portions of the entire work.

Chapter Nine, "The Erosion of the Agrarian *Polis*," suggests that the Athenian hoplite class of the fifth century deliberately extended political and social privilege beyond the agrarian class because the radical democracy brought clear financial profits to the farmers. In the long term, this extension of privilege would destroy the Athenian *polis*. This section is, however, poorly argued and unconvincing. For example, Hanson says that the growing democratization at Athens should have caused friction between the landed hoplites and landless citizens, but instead, "What occurred at Athens throughout the fifth and into the fourth century was actually a gradual diminution of hostility between the two groups, yeomen (*zeugitai*) and landless (*thetes*)" (p. 367). Instead of proof for this statement, the pages that follow offer assertions like: "There are, as we have seen, numbers of anecdotal passages in Greek literature attesting to the growing friction between landed conservatives and the naval mob. Under closer scrutiny these concerns are usually the disenchantment on the part of the more wealthy at Athens. There was probably not much complaint from the Athenian hoplite farmer ..." (pp. 369-70). One would prefer to see an argument, rather than an assumption, especially as he continues by discounting the "confirmation of agrarian hoplite resistance on the political level to the expansion of Athenian democracy" (p. 380), that is, the revolutions of the Four Hundred and of the Thirty Tyrants, on the basis that they were not successful (p. 380-82), as if their failure was caused by the lack of a desire to win.

This chapter also asserts that the hoplites went along with the new, radically democratic government at Athens because this government was financially profitable to them particularly. Curiously, the only means for profit are listed as: greater opportunity for theft, insidious private dealing by Athenian officials, and the introduction of pay for hoplite service (pp. 377-78). Thus, Hanson concludes, this policy was "much more lucrative to the landed" (p. 378), as if the landless did not share the three benefits he has enumerated. Yes, as he goes on to say, imperialism and an expansionary market profited Attic farmers, but he neglects to recognize that they also profited the landless merchants and traders equally well. Again, Hanson's one-sided approach distorts the total image unacceptably.

Another problem with this chapter is the use of simplistic argumentation. When talking about the movement in Athens to make *thetes* into hoplites, he says, "We never hear of a wish 'to make the hoplites into *thetes*,'" (p. 385) as if this were a legitimate argument and not a facetious remark. The tone continues on the next page when he discusses the exclusionary *ethos* of the Athenian hoplite class and the problems of including the landless in it. "The inclusion of the landless into the Athenian citizenry hardly exhausted the group of social and political inferiors. Hoplite landowners still realized that democracy provided sharp demarcations between free and slave, citizen and noncitizen, male and female, and even at times propertied and propertyless" (p. 386). So, one must assume, the Athenians did not mind including one group of social inferiors into their exclusive group as long as they still had other inferior groups to despise and disdain.

Chapter Ten, "Epilogue: World Beneath Our Feet," recapitulates the main points of the work and offers twelve fundamentals of Western Civilization that Hanson believes originated exclusively in agrarianism. He then presents his plea for the "vulgarization" of Classics and a eulogy on the American family farm in the face of agribusiness in this, the Hellenistic era of US history.

The most conspicuous weakness of *The Other Greeks* is Hanson's exaggerated claim that agrarianism is the exclusive cause of nearly every aspect of Greek society in the period of the *polis*. He freely and repeatedly admits this exclusivity: "*The Other Greeks* has offered an alternative, nearly exclusively agrarian account of four centuries of Greek social, political, and military history (700-300 B.C.)" (p. 405). "Fundamental changes in the way the early Greeks grew food (Part One, The Rise of Small Farmers in Ancient Greece) were, I think, the causes of *all* subsequent cultural development in the West" (p. 406). "Herein (Part Two, The Preservation of Agrarianism) arose *all* subsequent Greek military and political development for the next two centuries (700-500 B.C.), institutions that are rarely -- if at all -- discussed in connection to agrarianism" (p. 406). This style of writing produces such infelicities of expressions as: "The simultaneous Greek military revolution of the early seventh century is explicable only by this rise in agrarianism, not merely by the technological dynamism of the hoplite phalanx, terrifying though it was" (p. 407), as if the exclusivity of "only" could be shared ("not merely") with something else. He overstates his case so egregiously that the reader begins to see every italicized English word (and there are many of them) as a flashing red light, warning of an oncoming collision with such sentiments as: "My point rather is that agrarianism is the *one* unifying *institution* that gave the early Greeks common ground, a shared ideology, an agreed-on notion of government, values, and war. Agrarianism *defined* the nascent *polis* ..." (p. 126). Even if one can describe agrarianism as a social institution, Hanson is completely discounting the shared common-ground of myth and tradition as embodied in the works of Homer, common language, and religious cults, as if the Greek world was born again from the ashes of the Dark Ages, without a temporal or spatial context.

The Other Greeks is clearly organized and cleanly produced. I found only two minor typographical errors and one ungrammatical sentence. The book contains an extensive bibliography (23 pp.) and a general index, but unfortunately not an index locorum (although literary works are included in the index). The scholarly notes are presented as endnotes, a format that I dislike, but which corresponds with Hanson's desire to avoid scaring away the audience outside the university.

As a whole, I would say that this book ought to be read and carefully considered by the scholarly community, because its emphasis on the agricultural base of Greek social and political institutions holds great merit. Much of what Hanson says is convincing, even if the argumentation is not always as careful and detailed as scholars would like. On the other hand, I would not recommend this book to a non-scholar because the overstatements and generalizations require a skeptical reading that only comes with a certain minimum background knowledge. By the end of the book, the reader is left wondering whether the work is harmed because of the less-scholarly tone which Hanson adopts, or whether the tone conceals problems that are inherent in his thesis.